

Clean-Up-Workers (Deluxe Series)

Gayle Matthias

ORCID Number: 0009-0008-1567-2404

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Matthias, G., (2024) Clean-Up-Workers XIII (Deluxe Series) (Photo credit: Rod Gonzalez)

Project Overview

Clean-Up-Workers is a project framed as autoethnographic, mixed media practice-led research within the context of contemporary glass art. It operates as a critical methodology by reconfiguring material language through the theorisation and enactment of waste aesthetics, abjection, shifting material and social value, thereby challenging and destabilising the field's dominant technical and material orthodoxies.

When undertaking a literature review it is apparent that within the field of glass art, there is a predominance of research that presents technological innovation and/or technical skill over conceptual or theoretical content. Glass is still mainly employed as a singular material expressed through the material language of beauty, translucence, refraction and illumination. As the studio glass movement is approximately sixty years old this is understandable and this is exemplified by the fact it is only now that the first Glass Reader is due for publication.

There is a practice gap in relation to the lack of mixed media artefacts that incorporate found objects alongside kiln-formed glass, there being very few mixed media makers who work with glass as a key component of their mixed material language. Glass artists that are the exception to the rule are: Woffenden, Weinberg, Boanos-Durman, Ligacova, Stanicky. The researcher observes that there is a conceptual gap whereby current glass art practice can be conceptually outdated, simplistic or ignored with a focus on technical skill. There is a contextual gap, a limited understanding of how autoethnographic, conceptual practice intersects with craft/glass art through the medium of research into key theories. For example, the technical focus in doctoral theses by renowned glass artists Angela Thwaites's 'Towards Making the Unmakeable: How 3D Printing Can Inform Kiln Formed Glass Practice in the 21st Century', 2018 and Helen Slater Stokes, 'Exploring the Optical Perception of Image Within Glass', 2020.

This research wishes to address this imbalance through the production of authentic mixed media outcomes that use waste items alongside kiln-formed casts and blown glass, deliberately constructed in a low tech manner.



Matthias, G., (2022-2023) Clean-Up-Workers VI, Clean-Up-Workers XII, Clean-Up-Workers V (Deluxe Series), (Photo credits: Rod Gonzalez)

Research initially stemmed from autobiographical themes to do with the impact and decline of the former heavy industries located in Stoke-on-Trent (The Potteries); the artist's birthplace. The Potteries was home to pioneering sanitary ware production during the Victorian British Empire, but is now mainly a heritage site fallen into disrepair. Former collieries connect with the artist's father's car body repair garage which was sited in former miners' baths. Decline and disrepair are analogous to the aging female body. Found objects and materials were chosen to exemplify and epitomise these themes and responded to through mixed media assemblages.

Clean-Up-Workers presents a narrative of an unfulfilled life of domestic chores and isolation that was experienced by the artist's mother and other female family members of that silent generation. Through the production of *Clean-Up-Workers (Deluxe Series)* Matthias pays homage to domestic cleaners.

The series of complex compositions represents shabby, dysfunctional anatomical vacuum cleaners which unite:

- worn domestic cleaning materials
- by-products of Matthias's creative endeavours, including reappropriated work made from readymades such as sinks and waste objects from car parts
- Hand made cast, blown, and sheet glass constructions

Exploiting the tension between the opulent material, glass, with waste materials and objects, therefore raises questions about value and worth. Does the inclusion of glass items elevate the hierarchy of the junk or vice versa? What about the context in which the work then exists, how does that affect its status?

“Theoretical research into waste and discard theories, combined with autobiographical narratives was applied to the design development and ethos of the final sculptures. These mixed media sculptures are located on the periphery of glass art; the work could be perceived to challenge some preconceptions of traditional glass art practice, which has a tendency to focus on technical expertise and material singularity. I advocate an artistic scavenger mentality in order to both economise and expand both conceptually and materially” (Matthias 2023)



Matthias, G., (2022) Clean-Up-Workers VII and Clean-Up-Workers X (Deluxe Series) (Photo credits: Rod Gonzalez)



Research Method

The research is practice-led via the production of mixed media sculpture that embodies waste aesthetics and waste values. This particular series of work began in 2022, but was established on the back of a collection of assemblages called S-O-T Body Repairs (2016-18) and Clean-Up-Workers (2020).

The artist collects waste and categorises waste as: by-product, object or material, mainly of their artistic practice, and the owned object or material. Researching theoretical frameworks such as discard theories (Scanlan 2005, Thill 2015), abjection (Kristeva 1982), value (Viney 2015) and in particular Jacques Lacan's psychological theories of the 'objet petit a' developed in a number of books (1957-70), which provided a lens through which the work can be interrogated and disseminated through symposia presentations, papers and exhibitions.

The choice of waste items is not arbitrary, it is narrative driven, though it is in some respects governed by chance encounters. Implements used to control waste in a domestic arena: brushes and vacuum cleaners can be found in back streets by rubbish bins along with the usual fly tipping standards of broken sofas. Photographs are regularly taken of this detritus as ‘refuse still lives’.

Car scrap yards, that reference the researcher’s father’s car body repair garage, are also places to scavenge car parts such as shift boots that can then be translated through moulding into plaster, wax or glass replicas via lost wax casting. All car parts acquired in this way are paid for. Blown glass components were produced with the assistance of Colin Wilkes. The practice is rooted in the craft traditions of kiln-formed glass but very much sits on the boundary between craft and fine art.

Numerous pieces are in construction at the same time. Balance, counterbalance are achieved through the use of armatures and the researcher employed the services of Noah Taylor and Tom Matthews to realise the armatures. The series Clean-Up-Workers (Deluxe Series) is based around the destruction of an earlier piece of unsuccessful work called Sink and Plug (2007). The fragments of this work were repurposed in new assemblages.

Compositional and iterative design considerations are documented through photography and videos, ideas are also explored in sketchbooks. A professional photographer is employed to take images of completed work. The research is disseminated via presentations, lectures and paper submissions to conferences and journals through the field of glass art practice.

*“I align with the methodologies of assemblage and bricolage; however, I distinguish my practice in that I combine low-value materials and objects with high-end materials and processes that I create from scratch; these components have origins in craft production, such as glass casting. The material culture and associated aesthetics of glass make this material relevant to my visual language. It is not a material that I use in all my work, and the amount that is in a composition can be minimal. However, moulding found objects mainly from under the bonnet of a car allows modification through translation and combination of waxes to create unique glass casts that have corporeal associations of body dislocation and capture material optics and material value.”
(Matthias 2023)*

“Exploiting the tension between this opulent material, glass—with broken found objects and by-products or waste materials—therefore raises questions about material value and worth. Does the inclusion of glass items elevate the hierarchy of junk or vice versa?...When I dismantle Clean-Up Workers (Deluxe Series), the individual components resemble random items to be skipped, though each item is unique in its wear and tear and, therefore, irreplaceable. So, the authentic waste item is combined in an act of bricolage with the luxurious handmade.” (Matthias 2023)



Matthias, G., (2024) Work in progress images Clean-Up-Workers XIII (photo credits: Gayle Matthias)

Research Insights

Clean-Up Workers (Deluxe Series) demonstrates that by combining idiosyncratic waste selections of by-products of the artist's practice with the owned object or material, alongside bespoke crafted objects; the narratives of value and abjection become inherent in the work through the production of dysfunctional vacuum cleaners. The artist has successfully extended the use-time of the once defunct objects and materials, giving them a second life, a form of redemption.

Key waste theories were expanded upon by researching William Viney's 'Waste: A Philosophy of Things', 2015 and John Scanlan's book 'On Garbage', 2005. Matthias continued to draw upon the theories of Jacques Lacan ((1957-70) by creating work that includes margins and rims that may contain plug-like devices that represent his psychological theories. This research continues to inform the analysis of the work that is disseminated through artist statements, presentations and papers.

Using fragments from a prior piece of deliberately broken work (Sink and Plug, 2007) was a new way of working and provided a clear starting point. Scale became important as small shards of broken sink containing sheet glass were used to build new compositions, alongside more substantial sections of the broken sink. This helped to create a cohesive body of work.

The rarity of finding certain types of waste like the smashed wing mirror in non-spaces, such as the gutter, elevates the status of these objects in the artist's mind. But this can also be achieved by their position within a context. Through material or object associations, in this instance, high value kiln-formed glass meets low value quotidian waste, material hierarchy has been analysed.

Technical skills have also been acquired, combining glass with plastic and fabric can be difficult to achieve and a certain degree of engineering was necessary to build structures that were robust but appeared precarious. The introduction of fabric particularly leather and leatherette resulted in the acquisition of new construction knowledge. This may also broaden material language options for other makers. This methodology was acknowledged and promoted by glass artist Zac Weinberg, who included *Clean-Up Workers (Deluxe Series)* images and details about their construction in a Glass Art Society conference presentation in Detroit, US, 2023. Entitled, "Bolts, Nuts: The Dirty Details of Glass and Mixed-Media Assemblage" in which he discussed the technical nuances of attaching materials together for artistic ends. He covered mechanical fasteners and adhesives, as well as the pros and cons of non-glass materials, that also feature within his own practice, his intention being to inform and inspire the audience and to advocate mixed media assemblages that employ glass.

By exhibiting these assemblages in craft based museums and galleries, recontextualising the waste into something special, the researcher has created one off artefacts that contain distinctive visual language and symbolic meaning that challenges the viewer's preconceptions of glass art, given that it is now in direct correlation with waste items. *Clean-Up-Workers IV (Deluxe Series)* was purchased by the European Museum for Modern Glass to add to their permanent collection. The Coburg Glass Prize is a prestigious prize and exhibition, which previously focused on technical excellence in glass art. The purchase of this work indicates a shift in curatorial perspective and the landscape of glass art with more diverse mixed media work being selected. Judge, Dr Verena Wasmuth, Curator and Art Historian, based in Berlin, said in the exhibition catalogue, 'The Coburg Prize for Contemporary Glass 2022 reflects once again the highest level of material virtuosity. The competition additionally makes a new kind of diversity apparent, as artists address topics that are current, and charged with emotions' (2022, p.37). This illustrates that more conceptual glass art is being produced and/or selected for such prestigious exhibitions and that technical excellence is no longer the predominant criteria.

'Clean-up Workers' is a term that I encountered when researching the clean-up of radioactive waste after the accident at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in Ukraine. It seems an innocuous, child-like term for such a dangerous industrial-scale rectification that resulted in many deaths from acute radiation syndrome. I wanted to use it as a generic descriptor denoting all types of cleaners. The ironic qualifier, 'Deluxe Series', was added to mimic names such as Hoover's 'deluxe' Model 63, which debuted in 1953. In 1957. (Matthias 2023)

"I am not advocating that all waste is valuable and should be obsessively hoarded—the implications of that are detrimental. Implements/appliances used to control waste in a domestic arena—scrapers, brushes, and vacuum cleaners—are my current preoccupation. They can be found in back streets by rubbish bins along with the usual fly-tipping standards of broken sofas and DIY remnants. These sorts of abandoned items can be left for weeks as the refuse collectors refuse to dispose of them, but eventually, they are removed from sight."
(Matthias 2023)

Clean-Up Workers (Deluxe Series) demonstrates that by combining idiosyncratic waste selections of 'by-products of my practice' with the 'owned objects or materials' alongside bespoke crafted objects, the narratives of value and abjection become inherent in the work..The rarity of finding certain types of waste, like the smashed wing mirror in non-spaces, such as the gutter, elevates the status of these objects in my mind. But this can also be achieved by its 'position within a context'....Through material or object associations, in this instance, high-value kiln-formed glass meets low-value quotidian waste. But also, by exhibiting my assemblages in museums and galleries, I am recontextualising that waste into something special, a one-off artefact that contains symbolic meaning." (Matthias 2023)



Impact/Dissemination

Mixed media sculptures from 'Clean-Up-Workers (Deluxe Series)' have been exhibited in two UK exhibitions: Cluster Craft, London and the National Glass Centre, Sunderland. Also two international competition exhibitions with accompanying exhibition catalogues at the Ireland Glass Biennial, Dublin and the Coburg Prize for Contemporary Glass, Germany. A piece of work was subsequently purchased by the European Museum for Modern Glass, Coburg for their collection. There was an accompanying two day symposium as part of the Ireland Biennial at which a paper was presented that disseminated the theoretical and contextual frameworks for this series.

Two other pieces from this series were also selected, on separate occasions, for the annual international New Glass Review, a publication by the Corning Museum of Glass, US. Coburg Glass prize was featured in Glass, The Urban Glass Art Quarterly No.167, 2022. There was also a feature article which included a photograph of Clean-Up-Workers in New Glass: Art and Architecture No 1, 2022. Coverage of the Ireland Biennial was included in the following publications; Glas, Neu Glas, Urban Glass Quarterly, Gloss, Irish Arts Review, Glass, CGS, La Revue de la Céramique et du Verre.

This series is ongoing and has been widely disseminated to date, as documented on the following pages.



Clean-Up-Workers III (Deluxe Series)

Selected for the NGC Glass Prize exhibition at the National Glass Centre (NGC) in Sunderland in 2021, the first European Glass Prize exhibition at the NGC ran from 16 October 2021 to 13 March 2022, accompanied by a catalog of all work featured.

Since opening in 1998, the NGC has become a renowned center for glass education and research. The exhibition was featured in international bilingual journal 'New Glass: Art and Architecture' No 4 2021 by Emma Park freelance writer and podcaster.

The artworks on display were selected from around 40 European artists by a panel of judges including Sandra Blach (Glasmuseet Ebeltoft), Reino Liefkes (Victoria and Albert Museum) and Julia Stephenson (National Glass Centre). Supported by the Weston Culture Fund, the exhibition included work by artists from the UK, France, Sweden, Germany, Norway, Denmark, Poland, Italy, Romania, The Netherlands, The Czech Republic, Estonia and Belgium.



Matthias, G., (2021) Clean-Up-Workers III (Deluxe Series), (Photo credit: Rod Gonzalez) and Image credit: NGC logo, National Glass Centre

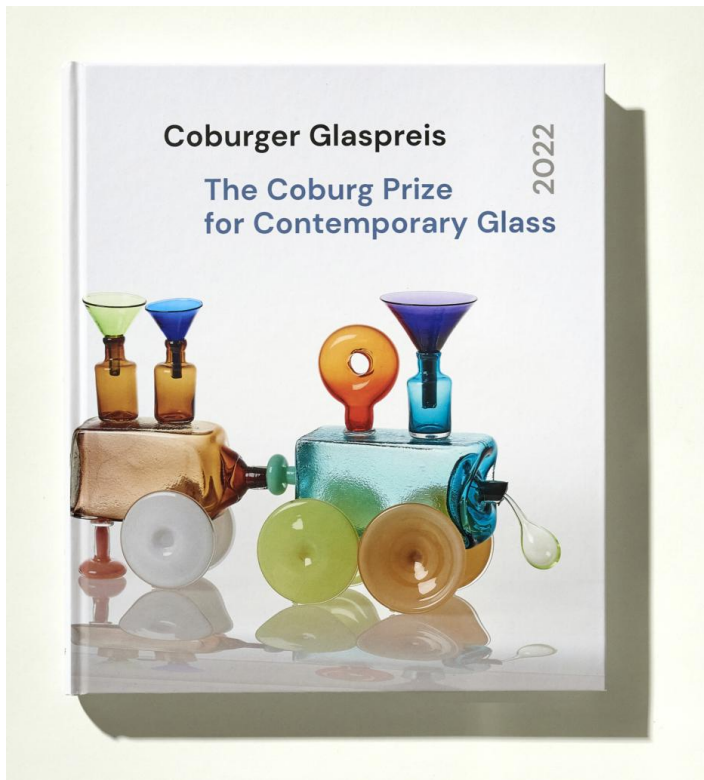


Image credit: Coburger Glaspreis 2022

The European Museum for Modern Glass, Coburg, Germany, purchased Clean-Up-Workers IV (Deluxe Series) after the work was selected for inclusion in the Coburg Prize for Contemporary Glass 2022 exhibition.

The seven-member jury consisted of Katarína Beňová, Maja Heuer, Franz Xaver Höller, Reino Liefkes V&A, Anne Vanlatum, Verena Wasmuth and Sven Hauschke. Around 400 artists from all over the world applied. In total, the jury examined over 700 objects for the accompanying exhibition and, in a multi-stage process, selected works by 87 artists from 22 countries.

The work was exhibited from 10 April to 25 September 2022 at the Veste Coburg and in the European Museum for Modern Glass in Rödentel, Germany. The 5th edition of the Coburg Prize for Contemporary Glass aimed to provide a Europe-wide overview of current trends and developments in contemporary glass art and again take stock of the situation. The objective was to show which design and processing techniques artists currently use, which thematic content predominates and whether current social questions, such as sustainability, political suppression, globalisation and climate change were taken into account. An exhibition catalogue accompanied the exhibition ISBN 978-3-7319-1194-4 which included the work.

Coburger Glaspreis featured in Glass, The Urban Glass Art Quarterly No.167. Andrew Page, editor of Glass wrote, "The Coburg Prize winners for 2022 show the increasing sophistication of the field. The 2022 Coburg Prize for Contemporary Glass shows a maturing field, with artists tackling social issues and concern about the environment".

Since it was launched in 1977, the prestigious Coburg Prize for Contemporary Glass has only been awarded five times. There was a feature article in New Glass: Art and Architecture No 1 2022. Written by Dr Sven Hauschke, Director, Veste Coburg Art Collection and Curator, Arts and Crafts Collections. He stated, 'Technically, conceptually and in terms of complexity, the works have reached an artistic level that was unprecedented with the last millennium and that has substantially risen in the last 10 years'. A photograph of Clean-Up-Workers IV (Deluxe Series) was included in the publication.

Clean-Up-Workers VII and VIII (Deluxe Series), were exhibited at Cluster Contemporary Fair at Bargehouse, Bargehouse St. London **3-6 Nov 2022**. A physical exhibition of 80+ international artists, The Cluster Contemporary fair highlighted contemporary visual art practices including all mediums from painting, sculpture, performance, sound and new media.

'We hand-picked each of the participating artists, making sure the whole professional spectrum is represented – already acclaimed and established names, emerging artists, award-winning craftsmen and fresh graduates'.

Founded in 2016, Cluster set out to be one of London's most affordable art fairs. Since then Cluster has grown into a celebration of diversity, style, material and themes, of ethnicity, background, age and class, a melting pot defined solely by the artistic necessity to express. To date Cluster has held 24 fairs, including one's dedicated to Illustration, Crafts, Contemporary Jewellery, Contemporary Art and Photography & Print. With over 1200 creatives featured, Cluster has formed a community of practitioners, which it supports through a programme of gatherings, career support, one-on-one development sessions, talks, seminars and workshops.



Image credits: Cluster Contemporary 2022

Matthias, G., (2022) Clean-Up-Workers VIII (Deluxe Series) (Photo credit: Rod Gonzalez)



IRELAND GLASS BIENNALE 2023 SYMPOSIUM

27.04.23 - 28.04.23

The Glass Symposium presents a two day
symposium. **Creative Resilience: advocacy and
community building through educational and glass
practice(s).**

Hibernian Conference Centre,
Dublin Castle, Dame Street, Dublin 2.

Ireland_glass_biennale@staff.ncad.ie



'Clean-Up-Workers (Deluxe Series): The embodiment of waste values and aesthetics', research paper was presented at the Ireland Glass Biennale 2023 Symposium *Creative Resilience: advocacy and community building through educational and glass practice(s)*, 27 April, 2023, Dublin Castle.

The two-day symposium brought together artists, designer-makers, educators, curators, researchers and students in an exploration of how to sustain the authenticity of their practices(s). Symposium Contributors alongside Gayle Matthias were: Debbie Dawson, Robin Cass, Róisín de Buitléar, Carrie Fertig, Karen Donnellan, Sadhbh Mowlds, Fiona Byrne, Kevin Killen, KT Hancock, Matt Duran, Thérèse Bouwens- van Herwaarden, Anna Varnase, Birgit Pählapuu and Gayle Matthias also moderated day two of the symposium.

Joining virtually was Cathye Yang, Academic Research Manager at the Shanghai Museum of Glass. Keynotes: Kevin O' Dwyer, Visual Artist and Andrew Brewerton, Professor Emeritus at Arts University Plymouth. This exhibition is the third international glass biennale to be presented by the National College of Art and Design, Dublin. It was part of a larger, EU-funded Creative Europe project, Imagining Sustainable Glass Network Europe (ISGNE), that strives to cultivate a transnational community of artists, designers, curators, researchers and cultural workers working in glass. ISGNE is led by four partners in the UK, Germany, Latvia and Ireland and involves organisations and makers across 19 European countries.

The symposium attracted 138 participants over a two-day period (Including Artists, Designer-makers, Curators, Researchers, Students, Cultural Workers and the general public).

Image credit: Ireland Glass Biennale 2023

Clean-Up-Workers VIII, VIII, X, XI (Deluxe Series), featured in the Ireland Glass Biennale 2023 exhibition at Coach House Gallery at Dublin Castle, Ireland, 28 April to 20 August 2023.

The exhibition was curated by Dr Caroline Madden of the National College of Art and Design, Dublin. Glass practitioners from Europe, North America, the Middle East and Asia were among those selected by the international panel of jurors. Of the 387 practitioners who applied in 2023, fifty-one practitioners were selected. The selection panel included: Kim Mawhinney, Senior Curator of Art at National Museums Northern Ireland; Katya Heller, Director of Heller Gallery in New York; Zhang Lin, Founder, Director and President of the Shanghai Museum of Glass, and Karen Donnellan, artist and educator.

The NCAD Ireland Glass Biennale presented international perspectives, explorations and manifestations of glass as creative expressions. The Ireland Glass Biennale highlighted the excellence and curiosity of contemporary glass practices by national and international artists, designers and crafts practitioners. An exhibition catalogue accompanied the event ISBN: 978-0-9955854-6-1 and coverage included event documentation in the following publications; Glas, Neu Glas, Urban Glass Quarterly, Gloss, Irish Arts Review, Glass, CGS, La Revue de la Céramique et du Verre.



Matthias, G., (2023) Clean-Up-Workers XI (Deluxe Series) (Photo credit: Rod Gonzalez)

The Annual New Glass Review is a flagship publication of The Corning Museum of Glass, US. Every year, the Museum launches a call for entries with 100 images selected for publication. In addition to being published, the submission is added to the Museum's archives, the single largest collection of images in the world of contemporary glass from the last 46 years. While the full collection isn't available online, images are preserved and available to onsite researchers upon request.

Clean-Up-Workers XIII (Deluxe Series) was selected for New Glass Review 44 publication in 2024. 737 individuals and collaborators from 44 countries had submitted 2,022 digital images. Selection was made by Tami Landis (Curator of Postwar and Contemporary Glass, the Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY), Natalie Melton (Executive Director, Crafts Council London), Anna Mlasowsky (Artist, Educator, Curator, Seattle, Washington, and Stockholm) and Alpesh Kantilal Patel (Art Historian, Curator, Critic, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania).

Clean-Up-Workers XV (Deluxe Series) was selected for New Glass Review 46 in 2026. They received 745 applications from 47 countries and the work was selected by a panel of international judges for the Corning Glass Museum: Tami Landis (Curator of Postwar and Contemporary Glass, the Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY), Hyeyoung Cho (Chair of the Korea Association of Art & Design, Seoul, South Korea), Simone Fezer: Artist and Educator, Stuttgart) and Lauren Gallow (Design Writer and Editor, Seattle, Washington).



Matthias, G., (2025) Clean-Up-Workers XV (Deluxe Series) (Photo credit: Rod Gonzalez)

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